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The provision of out-of-school care in Ireland

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Ursula Barry

Research Assistance: **Lara Loest**

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Barry, Ursula: ursula.barry@ucd.ie

Women's Studies, School of Social Justice, University College Dublin

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University College Dublin
Belfield, Dublin 4. Ireland
www.ucd.ie/socialjustice

1. Introduction

The large majority of young children in out-of-school care in Ireland are cared for by their parents – predominantly their mothers. Around 30% are in non-parental care services. Childcare is largely available only on the private marketplace or within informal extended family and community contexts, with the exception of a small amount of publicly funded childcare services in geographical areas designated as disadvantaged. Ireland has no comprehensive provision for pre-school childcare, early education or out-of-school care. In its response to Ireland's Employments Plans over successive years, the EU Commission has highlighted the inadequacy of Irish childcare policy and provision, a position echoed by the recent reports of the OECD as well as many national organisations, including women's organisations and trade unions. This Report analyses the provision for out-of-school care services in Ireland, the implications of the low level of public provision for care and the policies which currently inform that system.

Unlike most other EU countries, Ireland has invested few resources into the development and provision of childcare services. Ireland was traditionally a country with a low level of labour force participation by women and, to the extent that the State was involved with young children, it was limited to providing access to non fee-paying primary education from the early age of four years and universal child benefit paid directly to women. The last fifteen years has seen a dramatic change in the pattern of women's attachment to paid employment reflected in a strong growth in the proportion of women on the labour market up until 2008.

This new higher level of women's paid employment has brought with it new tensions in public policy. While the majority of women are now in paid employment outside the home, there has been no corresponding improvement in the system of care provision. Women continue to be the primary carers, whether as full-time carers in the home, or in taking responsibility for organising care arrangements for the household. From a traditional situation in which the majority of couple households were based on a single earner, dual earner households have increased significantly. There has also been an increase in the proportions of lone parents (primarily women) in paid employment, training and education.

Support for households and individuals combining paid employment with care responsibilities is low in Ireland. Statutory leave entitlements are at the lower end of the EU spectrum. While maternity leave has increased significantly over recent years, parental leave continues to be unpaid and there is no entitlement to paternity leave, a system which reinforces gender divisions in respect to care. Public support for childcare is minimal. On the private market, child and other care services are expensive and limited in availability. Reliance on extended family and community care supports plays a significant role but changes in women's economic position means that the availability of such care services is unlikely to continue at current levels into the future.

Despite an increasingly wealthy economy, public provision of care services remained at an extremely low level in Ireland even in the period of the highest economic and employment growth levels up to 2007/8. While significant increases in Child Benefit

were introduced, very little was done to develop an infrastructure for child and elder care in Ireland. High employment growth of the last decade had meant that Ireland had reached the Lisbon/Stockholm Employment targets for overall employment rates and the targeted employment rate for women by 2007. The severe economic crisis that has hit the Irish economy from late 2007 has resulted in huge pressure to reduce public expenditure, in part to close a budget deficit but largely to fund a collapsed overinflated banking sector. A consequence of this has been reduced care facilities for pre-school and school going children as well as a reduction in child benefit levels, a withdrawal of the payment of supports to parents of young children and a serious cut-back in the newly promised year of publicly-funded pre-school education.

2. Organisation of pre-primary and primary education

Education is compulsory for all children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen or until they have completed three years of second level education. The National School Curriculum is taught in all primary schools over 90% of which are owned and controlled by the Catholic Church, although the present government has announced that this will change aiming to reduce that percentage to fifty and increase the proportion of multi- and non-denominational primary schools. There are no fees for primary education but most schools require a so-called 'voluntary contribution' from parents to meet their daily running costs.

Pre-primary : Pre-school has traditionally been optional in Ireland and includes privately run crèches, play-schools and Montessori schools, which children generally attend between the ages of two, three and four. Up until 2009 parents paid for their children to attend pre-school if they were in a position to do so. A small number of publicly funded pre-school facilities have been available in disadvantaged areas. In 2009, in order to meet its commitments under the Barcelona Targets, the government introduced an entitlement to a year of free pre-schooling in the year prior to starting primary schools under the "Early Childcare and Education Scheme". For the first time children between three and four years of age would be entitled to a publicly funded pre-school place. However, this commitment was significantly diluted when the 2011 Budget announced that the entitlement for one year pre-school would be spread over two years because of cost constraints.

Primary education : Primary education starts at a relatively young age in Ireland. Children can enter primary education at four years of age - many do – and start school at four or five years of age. The compulsory starting age is six years. The first two years of primary school (junior infants and senior infants) are based on a four hour morning attendance from approximately 09.00am until 12.00 noon. Children are typically enrolled in the Junior Infant class at the age of either four or five depending on the wishes of their parents and the policy of the school. Once children enter first class through to sixth class the school day is extended and runs from approximately 09.00am until 14.00pm. Schools are closed generally for around two weeks at Christmas, two weeks at Easter and two months (July and August) over the summer. There are various other public holidays during the year. Pupils generally move onto secondary education at the age of twelve or thirteen years.

Because of the lack of a specific pre-school system almost all 5-year-olds and just over half of 4-year-olds attend infant classes that are part of the primary school system children. Overall access for the age-range 3-6 to government financed half-day or full-day services has been estimated by the OECD at about 56%, among the lowest

in Europe, and for the most part this is integrated into the formal primary system rather than a dedicated pre-school system. The Barcelona target is 90% for this age group and despite the government announcement in 2009 to make a publicly funded pre-school place an entitlement for all 3-4 year olds, this commitment has already been significantly reduced in the 2011 Budget (cutback to a one year entitlement spread over two years) and consequently public provision is only available to a very small proportion of pre-school children – estimated at around 4% of the total (OECD 2004).

3. Out-of-school services: facts and figures

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) through the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) regularly reports on availing of care services by different households with children 12 years and under. It covers four areas: type of childcare used during the workday; number of hours children spend in childcare; cost of childcare per child; preferred alternative childcare and these are detailed below (CSO 2009).

3.1 Out-of-school services for children in pre-primary education

Provision of out-of-school services is diverse and fragmented, spread across a childcare sector that is predominantly either family or market-based. Public support for out-of-school facilities for children in pre-primary and primary education is minimal. A significant proportion of parents (around 12%) rely on unpaid and paid family support in order to combine paid employment and childrearing, although an increasing use of paid childminders has become more evident over recent years. Women who work as paid childminders form a major component of out-of-school services and operate predominantly from within their own homes, frequently combining paid care services with their own childrearing responsibilities. This service is usually available year-round for the full day, according to the needs of the parents. Transactions between parents and childminders are frequently conducted in the informal economy - only those childminders caring for more than 3 children are required to notify the Health Boards.

Centre-based child care (nurseries and crèches) cater for children from 2-3 months old to school age and many also provide after-school care. These services are market-based, mainly privately owned and operated. There are also a small number of community-based services in some designated areas of disadvantage aimed at lower income families. It does not cover pre-school education where it is linked to the educational system (as this is defined as ‘early education’) and mainly funds ‘creches’ which are defined as ‘childcare’ and thus eligible for funding. However, the crisis in the economy has resulted in cut-backs in community development programmes negatively affecting these essential services. There are, in addition, some workplace crèches and drop-in crèches providing work-based care services.

There are also a wide range of playgroups and pre-schools, mostly privately owned, which provide part-time services (< 3.5 hours/child/day) for children typically aged 2-5 years. Parent and toddler groups are sometimes attached to crèches and nurseries, offering play for children and social interaction/support for parents. Montessori schools, privately owned and managed, cater mainly for children 3-6 years. *Naionrai*

(attached to Irish language schools) are pre-schools and form a part of this varied set of services, catering for children 3-6 years.

Based on the mix of data available, in their thematic review, the OECD estimated that only 10% to 15% of children 0-3 years have access to half-day or full day publicly subsidised pre-school education services, falling far short of the 33% target set by the Barcelona European Council (OECD 2004).

Children of mothers with third level education were more likely to use non-parental childcare (42%) than children of mothers with lower levels of education. This was true for both pre-school and primary school children. Just over half (53%) of pre-school and a third of primary school children whose mother had third level education used non-parental childcare. Working patterns of parents had a significant effect on whether children used non-parental childcare, in particular, where at least one parent was not in paid employment the proportion using non-parental childcare dropped significantly.

3.2 Out-of-school care for school going children

Out-of-school care for school going children operates largely the same way as that for pre-school children, as described above, and frequently overlap. Out-of-school services for school going children are largely informal childcare services based on family and community systems or on the private marketplace. These services in Ireland are largely provided through paid and unpaid relatives, private carers and creches/nurseries on the private marketplace. Primary school children spend on average 13 hours per week in non-parental childcare and the higher a mother's education level the more she is to be in paid employment and therefore availing of mainly market-based childcare services. Public funding for out-of-school care for school going children is extremely limited and is primarily oriented towards the development of care facilities in designated geographical areas of disadvantage. Low income households in particular depend on publicly subsidised childcare which is of limited availability, while middle and higher income families pay high costs on the private market place.

3.2.1. Availability

A Childcare Module carried out as part of the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) in 2007 and published in 2009 is the latest most comprehensive national data on childcare in Ireland and covers pre-school and primary school going children under twelve years. This module revealed the following data for 2007 :

- 30% of children aged 12 years and under are in non-parental childcare
- Pre-school children (64%) were more likely to be availing of childcare facilities than primary school children (81%)
- Between 2002 and 2007 the proportion of households using non-parental childcare for pre-school children increased from 42% to 48% while the

comparable proportion in relation to primary school children remained unchanged at 25%.

This CSO Report also highlighted the services accessed by different households with children up to 12 years and revealed that 42% of pre-school children and 22% of primary school going children were in non-parental care services. One of the reasons for the higher levels of non-parental care in the youngest age group in lack of entitlement to publicly funded services combined with the organisation of the primary system. Those parents with the income level to avail of services on the private marketplace have the option of accessing day long services when their children are pre-school age enabling them to combine child rearing and full-time employment. Once the children reach school going age the limited hours of school attendance limits the job options of many parents as well as the care services they can access. So, in practice accessing care services is easier for some parents when their child/ren are in the youngest age category.

Table 1 Types of childcare used by children aged 0-12 years by school going status

	Pre-school	Primary	All
Parent/Guardian	64%	81%	75%
Unpaid relatives	9%	9%	9%
Paid relative	4%	3%	3%
Childminder/au pair/nanny	12%	7%	9%
Creche/Montessori/Playgroup/After-school	19%	3%	9%
Other	1%	1%	1%
Total using non-parental services	42%	22%	30%

Source: CSO 2009

The CSO 2009 report also reveals a variation across the regions with a greater proportion of households in more rural regions (border region 73%) using parental care while a higher proportion in more urban regions (south-east region 66%) used non-parental care services. Differences also emerged according to types of households with lone parent households and households with two parents working using the highest level of non-parental care services. Higher levels of use of non-parental care services occurred in households in which the educational attainment level of mothers or lone parents was the highest, varying from 8% in which the mother had primary education to 42% in which the mother had third level qualifications. Predictably the employment status of parents also had a significant impact on the use of non-parental care, with the highest level occurring in households in which both parents or a lone parent was in paid employment (58%) and the lowest level in households in which the mother was not in paid employment (6%) (CSO 2009).

Data for pre-primary children indicate that the most commonly used form of childcare is the parents themselves. 64% of all pre-primary children are cared for by a parent and a further 19% are in creches, montessoris, playgroups and after-school facilities. Overall 42% of pre-primary children are in some form of non-parental childcare during the workday - see Table 1 above. These children spend an average of 24 hours

per week in non-parental childcare which is twice as much time as their school age counterparts. In relation to the numbers of hours per week spent in non-parental care the overall average among children under 12 years was 19 in 2007.

Use of non-parental childcare was more common for pre-school children (42%) than for primary school children (22%). This was more evident in households where the child lived with both parents. Non-parental childcare was used by 44% of pre-school children who lived with both parents, compared with 21% of primary school children who lived with both parents. Among children in lone parent households one third of pre-school children used non-parental childcare compared with one quarter of primary school children.

Among pre-school children living with both parents the proportion using childcare was as follows:

- 68% when both parents worked full time
- 59% when the mother worked part-time and the father worked full-time
- 29% when the father was not working and the mother was in full- time paid work
- 14% when the mother was not in employment and the father was working full-time.
- 60% in lone parent households where parent was working either full-time or part-time.

Although non-parental childcare was less commonly used by primary school children, the working arrangements of the parents still had a significant impact on the usage of non-parental childcare.

50% where with both parents where both worked full-time.

25% where the father was working full-time but the mother was working part-time.

2% where the father worked full-time but the mother was not at work

68% in lone parent households where their parent worked full-time.

The likelihood of using non-parental childcare clearly fell as the number of children in the household increased. For example, half of pre-school children who were the only child aged 12 years or under living in their household used childcare. However, when the pre-school child was one of three or more children aged 12 years or under, this proportion fell to just under one third (32%). Among primary school children who were the only child aged 12 years or under in the household 27% used childcare. This compares with 17% of children who were one of three or more children aged 12 years or under living in the household (CSO 2009).

3.2.2 Quality

In 1996, the Department of Health and Children produced a document on childcare regulations which was the first to establish stated Irish policy in relation to childcare. This document was updated in 2006, and covers preschool services (not including infants to aged three children) and is the only government sanctioned policy specifying childcare quality standards nationally. Providers are guided by regulations in relation to health and safety, age range of pre-school children, adult/child ratios,

group size and space per child. Authority to inspect premises and to make and enforce regulations is vested in the Health Service Executive (HSE 2006). Quality issues from the perspective of the child. According to the NGO Pobal '(a) standard definition of quality in childcare provision is currently unavailable in Ireland'(Pobal, 2005). No national inspection mechanism exists to assess aspects of quality outside of state funded infant classes in primary schools (CECDE, 2003).

The establishment of quality standards and their enforcement has largely been left to voluntary membership organisation bodies. These membership organisations provide a diverse range of services, many in local communities and supported by voluntary workers. The National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) are membership-based and support the various categories of childcare providers in Ireland, including discussion and recommendations on policy. Pobal notes that while

'there is clear agreement on many of the key aspects of quality within childcare services... one can also see the specific areas of interest and expertise of each in their quality-related work' (Pobal 2005).

The large majority (89%) of member organisations of the NVCOs are private providers. All of the NVCOs are involved in training, but to varying extents, due to differences in levels of funding. NVCOs have established a system of self-regulation within which needs are analysed, training is developed and courses are delivered. NVCOs collectively held 160 workshops or seminars, 89 accredited training courses and 181 non-accredited courses in 2005 to 4,824 providers nationally (Pobal 2005). Many associations provide quality standard guidelines and best practice models to their members, some of which were funded under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) under the Irish National Development Plan 2000-2006, part funded by EU Structural Funds. These guides are not national standards but rather association membership standards, and are mainly focused on child protection. In addition, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a two-year prevention and early intervention service for children aged three to four years, and their parents or carers (French et al., undated; siolta.ie, Duignan et al 2004.).

Linked to the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) thirty-three City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) were set up in 2001 to strengthen cooperation and coordination in childcare in each local area (IBEC/ICTU, 2005). Improving quality was one of the objectives specified in the establishment of the CCCs. Each CCC has twenty-two members who represent different stakeholders including parents, providers, employers, the community and voluntary sector, trade unions, government departments and farming organisations. Each CCC has developed a five-year strategic plan, receives funding from the National Childcare Initiative Programme (NCIP previously the EOCP) and performs the functions of advising and supporting as well as liaising and coordination. CCCs play a part in directly providing training or in coordinating with training delivery agencies. In 2005, CCCs throughout Ireland reported providing or organising 722 training courses of which 322 were accredited (Pobal, 2005). In Ireland, training and qualifying for a career in childcare has been organised on an ad hoc basis which has led to 'duplication of provision, inconsistency in standards, lack of awareness as to the skills courses... and difficulties regarding access' (CECDE, 2003). Ambiguity in relation to the regulation of qualifications has resulted in a situation in which personnel have a diverse range of skills and

knowledge, a sizable proportion lack any formal training and the establishment of career pathways has not taken place.

More specific regulations were set down in the Department of Health and Children's Childcare (Pre-School) Regulations 2006 in relation to adult/child ratios for various child care services, detailed in the following table.

Table 2: Recommended Adult/Child Ratios for the various childcare services, per Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006

Full Day Care Service

AGE RANGE	ADULT/CHILD RATIO
<i>0-1 year</i>	1:3
<i>1-2 years</i>	1:5
<i>2-3 years</i>	1:6
<i>3-6 years</i>	1:8

Part Time Day Care Service

AGE RANGE	ADULT/CHILD RATIO
0-1 year	1:3
1-2 years	1:5
2-3 years	1:6
3-6 years	1:8

Sessional Pre-school Service

AGE RANGE	ADULT/CHILD RATIO
0-1 year	1:3
1-2.5 years	1:5
2.5-6 years	1:10

Pre-school service in drop-in centre or temporary drop-in centre

AGE RANGE	ADULT/CHILD RATIO	MAX. GROUP SIZE
<i>Full age integration 0-6 yrs</i>	1:4	24

*no more than 2 children younger than 15 months per adult.

Childminding Service

AGE RANGE	ADULT/CHILD RATIO
Preschool	1:5

*no more than 2 children younger than 15 months per adult (exceptions for siblings and multiple births)

Overnight pre-school service

AGE RANGE	ADULT/CHILD RATIO
<i>0-1 year</i>	1:3
<i>1-6 years</i>	1:5

Source: Department of Health and Children 2006

Childcare preschool regulations require providers to 'ensure appropriate vetting of all staff, student and volunteers who have access to a child' and when possible employ Garda vetting and 'previous employer' references for all staff (HSE, 2006). Within Childcare Preschool Regulations, staff qualifications are specified as

"A suitable and competent adult is a person (over 18 years) who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age and/or who has an appropriate qualification in childcare... It is acknowledged that many childcare staff have a qualification or are working towards achieving

one. In centre-based services, it is considered that the person in charge should aim to have at least fifty percent of childcare staff with a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children. The qualified staff should rotate between age groupings. Induction training should be provided by the service.” (HSE, 2006).

In 2002, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform launched a model framework for childcare providers intended to enable those working in the sector to identify their position within a professional development plan. This framework defines and identifies core competency areas such as child development, personal/professional development, social environment, health and safety, education and play, and communication and administration management. Profiles, including level of experience and expertise in each of these areas are specified for defining practitioner levels which include: basic, intermediate, experienced, advanced and expert practitioners. Routes of access, transfer and progression, of and through these levels, are outlined, through education and training which entails meeting specified requirements, or solely through experience which includes no formal qualifications (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2002).

More recently, in 2006, the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) put out Guidelines for Diversity and Equality for Childcare Providers. Their stated aims are to :

- support childcare practitioners, early childhood teachers, managers and policy makers in their exploration, understanding and development of diversity and equality practice
- foster awareness about diversity and equality issues
- stimulate discussion about bias and discrimination [and] encourage the development of services that are inclusive of all children and their families’ (OMC, 2006).

The guidelines detail steps for providers to develop and adhere to a diversity and equality policy, and include sections on accessibility, partnering opportunities, environmental considerations, gender, religion, discipline, traditions, and bullying. While these guidelines are clear, comprehensive and accessible, the key issue is the extent of their implementation (OMC, 2006).

In 2006 the OMC also distributed guidelines to childcare services which included professional requirements for childminders, environmental guidelines including health and safety, and statutory/voluntary notification requirements. The guidelines lack specific indicators are fall short of measurable requirements. The OMC has since made clear that these requirements are due for updating (as they currently reference the outdated 1996 childcare regulations) in order to be relevant to the current situation. Under the National Childcare Strategy a National Childcare Coordination Committee (NCCC) was formed chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. A sub-group of the NCCC developed a Model Framework on Qualifications in the childcare sector which acts as a guide to the National Qualifications Authority (Duignan et al, 2004).

As a result of the lack of a statutory framework, quality standards have largely been left to the voluntary sector to organise on an ad-hoc basis. Voluntary organisations, such as Barnardos, or individual city/county childcare committees, for example, have formulated a much needed guide for childcare providers outlining professional training paths. Stated childcare training paths include ‘suggested’ categorisation of each specific qualification at different levels linked to the national qualifications framework, for example : level four for classroom assistants, level five for room and team leaders and level six for supervisors (Limerick & North Tipperary CCCs, undated).

Despite research backing the need for a more formal professional system for workers in the childcare sector, no government requirement exists to set down a standard of qualifications. Coupled with low pay across the sector, and the ever increasing demand for additional childcare provision in Ireland, if a standard qualification were to be set, it would be impossible to achieve without a complex plan identifying and addressing different barriers, the foremost of which is funding. Until then, it seems impossible to envisage a quality framework for Ireland’s childcare providers that is anything other than ‘ad-hoc’.

3.2.3 Flexibility

Many households in Ireland depend on relatives or neighbours for childcare arrangements and one of the reasons for this is that it provides be a high level of flexibility. This is not the case in formal childcare. Most crèches in Ireland open set hours from 7.30 or 8.00am in the mornings to 6.00pm or 6.30pm in the evenings. A survey carried out for the Sunday Business Post in 2005 found no example of childcare facilities operating during evenings, overnight or weekends (Sunday Business Post January 2005). School hours in Ireland are far shorter than the hours childcare facilities are open. Children at primary (first level) schools generally leave school at 12.00 or 2.00pm and at second level at around 4.00pm. After school facilities are available in only a small number of schools at second level and are rare at first level.

It is not surprising that non-parental childcare happens in significantly fewer households once the children are old enough to attend school. It is a common experience of many households with two or more children to be faced with a staggered daily collection system not conducive to combining paid employment and childrearing. Part-time places in crèches and other childcare facilities are limited in their availability. Many crèches offer only full time placements in what is predominantly a suppliers market. Frequently women find themselves paying for a full-time place but using the place for less than full-time hours.

“ Provision in the childcare sector is diverse and fragmented. Parents typically avail of one or more of a number of forms of provision including parental care, informal care, childminding (family day care), workplace crèches, private and community nurseries and crèches, community and private sessional services for 3 – 5 year olds and primary education “ (NWCi 2005)

A comparative survey of fathers and mothers and work-life balance issues carried out in Ireland, France, Italy and Denmark revealed that Irish parents (predominantly

women) have no option but to use annual leave in circumstances in which the usual childcare arrangements are unavailable (e.g. during holidays, when crèche is closed, when grandparents are unavailable or when a child is sick). Irish parents were shown to use annual leave more than any other country and to have a very low usage of parental leave. This low usage of parental leave is most likely accounted for by the fact that it is unpaid and that many employers require it to be taken as a block (European Commission, 2005).

What has become a major policy issue for women in Ireland is the limited, and frequently extremely costly, options of childcare services that are available, their lack of flexibility and the extremely poor level of public support for out-of-school childcare services.

“ A majority of children now spend time in various ‘bridging settings’ between the home and school....These various early childhood settings provide an important service to families and society and it is time that Irish policymakers recognised this and supported them directly in a manner comparable to that for similar services.” (Dr Noirin Hayes quoted in Irish Times ‘Who Cares ? 19 January 2008).

3.2.4 Affordability

Research on childcare provision in Ireland reveals that Irish people are paying almost twice as much as the EU average for childcare, and the cost of childcare in Ireland is among the highest in the EU. The average cost of a full-time place in a pre-school childcare facility (crèche) is about 20% of earnings compared to an EU average of 12%. This high cost of childcare has a particular effect on low-income households and creates a definite barrier to accessing paid employment, education and training.

“The cost of childcare is a particular issue for disadvantaged families and is acknowledged as remaining as a significant barrier to the uptake of further education or work for low income families, particularly single parents. Affordability is also a major issue for higher income levels, particularly for families with more than one child requiring childcare.” (National Economic and Social Council (NESC) 2005).

The lack of public subsidisation of childcare is highlighted by the National Women’s Council of Ireland as the main reason why the costs of childcare are so high in Ireland.

“ There is practically no public subsidisation of childcare in Ireland, so that’s what’s making us more expensive in comparison with other European countries. “
(Orla O’ Connor, National Women’s Council of Ireland quoted in Sunday Business Post January 23 2005.)

With the exception of an extremely limited number of childcare places, parents in Ireland pay for childcare from their own take-home income or rely on unpaid assistance from family or community. Little attention has been paid to the issue of affordability. There is no tax relief or tax credits for childcare in Ireland. Providers of

childcare set their own rates which can vary considerably depending on the type and quality of service, location, age of child, and hours of attendance. Flexibility in terms of access and use of services can be very difficult to establish. Many crèche facilities, for example, do not provide for part-time care, and will only accept children on a full-time basis or on the basis of paying a full-time fee.

A survey of costs carried out for the National Women's Council in 2005 reached the following conclusion :

“According to this data, childcare costs account for approximately 20% of the earnings for lone parents with one child; and between 33% and 43% of earnings for lone parents (on the average industrial wage) with two children (depending on whether the parent is in full-time or part-time employment). The situation is worse for parents on the minimum wage. Of particular note is the high cost borne by lone parents on the minimum wage with two children where between 61% and 78% of income is consumed by childcare cost.” (National Women's Council, 2005).

Data from the QNHS Childcare Module reveals the high cost of out-of-school care to parents who are dealing with high hourly payments on the open private marketplace forcing many to avail of services through the informal market. On average, parents spend approximately €144 per week on non-parental childcare for their children under the age of 12. The cost increases when both parents are working to an average of €186 per week and there are significant regional variations with the higher cost in the Dublin area (€192 per week) and lowest cost in the border region (€144 per week). CSO data also shows that higher costs are associated with different forms of childcare. For example, care services provided by ‘childminder/au pair/nanny’ followed closely by ‘creche/montessori care’ carried the highest hourly rates for both pre-school and primary school children and ‘paid relatives’ the lowest hourly rate. Households availing of 41 hours or more paid an average of €285 per week for childcare compared to those availing of 10 hours or less whose weekly average payment was €44. Overall the care of primary school children carried higher costs than the care of pre-school children. According to this report :

“The hourly cost for childcare is on average higher for primary school children than for pre-school children. The average hourly cost of childcare was €6.00 per hour, per child, for primary school children, compared with €4.90 for pre-school children” (CSO 2009).

The implication of such high costs in accessing childcare is that opportunities to avail of training, education and employment opportunities among those on low and even middle incomes is severely restricted, impacting negatively on women who carry the primary responsibility for childrearing and reinforcing both gender inequalities and social class divisions in Irish society.

3.2.5 Attitudes

The CSO Childcare Module explored parents' preferred type of childcare and revealed that 20% wanted an alternative type of care for their pre-school children and 15% for their primary children. The most popular alternative emerged as creche/

montessori/playgroup care chosen by 35% of households for their pre-school children and 30% for their primary school children. The majority of households in Ireland who are accessing childcare services have little option but to rely on the private marketplace. The most common reason cited for not accessing their preferred alternative for pre-school children was cost (41%) followed by lack of availability of service (32%).

For those whose preference was parental care cost again emerged as the key factor, in this case the cost of not working (70% in relation to pre-school and 47% in relation to primary school children). Lack of availability of service was the more commonly cited factor for not accessing their preferred alternative in relation to primary school children (48%) followed by cost (30%).

Parents were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “I have access to high quality, affordable childcare in my community”. Nearly two-thirds (60%) of households disagreed with this statement while less than one-third agreed (11% expressed no opinion). The highest level of disagreement with the statement was expressed by Dublin parents/guardians and the lowest in the Mid-West region (CSO 2009). It is clear that parents want quality affordable childcare with flexibility to reflect differing labour market situations. And it is also clear that the Irish system falls a long way short of delivering such childcare options.

3.2.6 New developments

Few new developments are evident in Ireland in relation to out-of-school care services. The severe economic crisis that has hit the Irish economy since mid-2007 means that public services and public support for services are being cut-back a situation which has seen a reduction in child care services operating at community level. The new government which has taken up office in April 2011 has upgraded the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) to the level of a senior ministry and a position within cabinet. This is a welcome development but it is likely that the necessary focus of this new ministry will be on the crisis in child protection services rather than the issue of child care services.

3.3 Debate

The Report from the OECD published in September 2004 strongly criticises Ireland’s lack of early childhood education and care provision arguing for increased resources to improve provision. In addition, the Report argues for a system of paid parental leave of one year’s duration – to replace the current system of unpaid leave over fourteen weeks. A further key recommendation is for a guaranteed publicly funded pre-primary place for all children and for full school days for all young children from disadvantaged areas (OECD 2004).

Increasing the ‘supply and affordability’ of childcare facilities has been highlighted in both the EU Employment Taskforce and the Joint Employment Reports (2004) as a key recommendation to the Irish government. Ireland has a long way to go in the

development of a comprehensive childcare system and existing measures, such as the Childcare Initiative (and the earlier Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme) mainly targeted at disadvantaged areas, while significant, remain limited in tackling the scale of what has become termed the 'care crisis'.

Data from the QNHS has consistently shown that a significant proportion of households desired alternative forms of childcare than those they were currently using. Around 20% of families indicate a desire for alternative forms of childcare, particularly access to crèche/Montessori care among those with pre-school children. The clear barriers to households in realising their preferred option was cost, both in terms of the high cost of market services and also the cost of not-working where the preferred option was parental care.

Discussion of childcare and childcare policy in Ireland tends to focus on the critical questions of the number of places, the crisis in availability, its high cost and the issue of affordability. In the context of a chronic shortage of provision, little attention has been paid to childcare and out-of-school services from the standpoint of the child, the implementation of a system of quality care and the need for access to early childhood care and education, particularly for low income households. The introduction of a publicly supported and funded pre-school place for all children between 3 and 4 years was warmly welcomed (linked to Barcelona targets). However, within eighteen months that provision was severely cut-back reducing it from one full year to a year of provision spread over two years.

4. Childcare services: research, policies and challenges

4.1 Labour market achievements

A Report published in March 2005 by the Forum on the Workplace of the Future argued that the high cost of childcare in Ireland – the highest in the Europe – were keeping large numbers of women out of the workforce. This Report highlighted that childcare costs in Ireland are almost twice the EU average resulting in a “serious under-utilisation of women’s high standard of education and skills” (National Centre for Partnership and Performance 2005).

Low levels of provision is a critical issue for both pre-school and primary school age children, with after-school provision of limited availability and mainly market-based. Shortages in out-of-school care provision have been continuously highlighted as a concern over the past decade. For example, the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group highlighted that

‘there is a growing need for locally based programmes which provide children with social, recreational and development activities outside of school hours and during holiday time. Such provision could be provided on school premises or in community buildings’ (D/JELR 2009)

Over the period 2002 to 2007, an increased use of non-parental care for pre-school children has been evident, particularly the use of creche/montessori/playgroup facilities, which rose from 14% to 24%. Over the same period the use of non-parental care for primary school children remained the same at 25%.

Looking at the labour market situation of Irish women over the last decade it is evident that change has been both significant and rapid. As well as the growth in the level of women's employment, its composition has also undergone significant change. Between 2000 and 2008 women's employment rate increased from 53% to 61%. The strongest growth in women's paid employment rate has taken place in the 35-44 age group and also in the 45-54 age group (CSO 2010, Barry 2010). These figures reflect the way in which the pattern of increasing employment rates has been working its way through different generations of Irish women. The gap between the employment rate of younger and middle age groups of women has narrowed significantly and even in the older age group a similar pattern of change is emerging.

The importance of policies to support women's paid employment during childrearing years, such as childcare, family friendly and flexible workplace policies has also been emphasised by the Consultative Group established by government to analyse and suggest ways to address the gender pay gap. (Consultative Group on Male/Female Wage Differentials 2002, Indecon, 2004)

In the context of a lack of available and affordable childcare however, employment trends do continue to show a steep decline in women's labour force participation depending on factors such as the age of their youngest child - gender differences are very marked as the following table reveals :

**Table 3 : Employment Rates of Men and Women
(%) aged 20–44 by age of youngest child 2010**

Family Status	Men	Women
No children	85.7	86.3
Youngest child aged 0 - 3	80.2	56.0
Youngest child aged 4 - 5	78.6	48.4
Youngest child aged 6 +	76.8	60.0
TOTAL	80.7	62.3

Source : CSO
2010.

What is particularly evident from this table is the huge difference between men and women's employment rates as soon as there are children in the family. Between couples without children employment rates are almost the same. The other important point is the significance of the age of the youngest child for women's employment rate. What is revealed in this table is that employment rates for women are not at their lowest when the child is the youngest (56.0) but rather when the child reaches school going age between 4 and 5 years (48.4). This is most likely linked to the structure of Ireland's short school day and the difficulties of combining school attendance with part-time.

This highlights that the central issue in relation to women's access to employment is the lack of a proper care infrastructure, particularly the lack of adequate child and education services and the perpetuation of financial disincentives within a household-based welfare and taxation system.

4.2 Child Development

The established need to provide, and expand on, high quality childcare services has existed in Ireland for over a decade, and continues to be a focus of discussions across a number of organisations, governmental bodies, sub-committees and public opinion discourse (CECDE, 2003, IBEC/ICTU, 2005). There is a strong consensus by the majority of stakeholders that high quality childcare provision in Ireland is imperative for the welfare of children and that key challenges in the Irish childcare sector are the low pay and low status of personnel, staff training and education, and the prohibitive costs to families (CECDE, 2003 Duignan et al, 2004).

There have been a number of developments in the establishment of guidelines for the provision of quality childcare services, driven largely by pressure from childcare providers themselves. Government issued guidelines continue to lack a statutory basis and are marked by a weak regulation and enforcement system. There has also been some development in the system of training and qualifications of those providing care. Despite the lack of national minimum standards, there has been an increase in universities and other institutes offering qualifications and degree courses related to childcare. Some individual institutes have collaborated with stakeholders in the development of core standards and training approaches, in spite of a lack of national standards (CECDE, 2003).

4.3 Social Inclusion

In the context of a new National Development Plan 2007-2013 a new funding system (National Childcare Investment programme NCIP) for public support to childcare services in disadvantaged areas was introduced in 2007 and involved a move away from funding staff salaries in community based crèches and towards direct funding for parents on welfare. The stated rationale behind this change was to create a more targeted system and to ensure that households on middle level incomes could not avail of publicly supported childcare.

The impact of this most recent policy change has been significant, and largely negative. Childcare providers in disadvantaged communities no longer receive subsidies towards staffing and find it increasingly difficult to plan and develop their services. Households with access to these services are now increasingly welfare dependent rather than the socio-economic mix which had characterised those services previously. Under the earlier funding system (and linked to EU funding) a specified ratio of 60% disadvantaged and 40% from non-welfare families had been laid down. This system had been based on the principle of applying charges according to income levels (a system which did have some problems in establishing appropriate charges for relevant income levels). Some of those involved in childcare provision in disadvantaged areas argue that the lack of staff supports may mean that they will be forced to recruit less qualified and less trained staff at lower wage levels. In introducing the NCIP the system for funding childcare services underwent significant changes – changes that have been strongly criticised as limiting access to services to

households dependent on social welfare and excluding many low and middle income households.

“ The decision to change the system of funding community crèches threatens to ghettoise the service and is symptomatic of a childcare policy which is failing Irish children and their parents.” Kathy Sheridan, Irish Times 19 January 2008.

4.4 Debate

In their analysis of Irish childcare policy key commentators have highlighted how policy is trapped by the historical situation of low funding, due to an assumption of full-time unpaid carers in the home (women). As a result policy tends to focus on the number rather than the quality of childcare places, driven by a policy of increasing women’s labour force participation.

“ The focus in respect of early childhood education and care is therefore primarily on women and not on children, resulting in investment policy that creates childcare spaces for children, gives cash payments to parents and facilitates

Dr Noirin Hayes quoted in Irish Times 19 January 2008

A detailed study carried out in 2001 by Sinead Riordan of the Centre for Social and Educational Research at the Dublin Institute of Technology, explored the pattern of childcare use across households at different income levels. In her survey 25% of mothers compared to 90% of fathers were in full-time employment. Most of the mothers in employment were in part-time employment. A mixture of formal and informal childcare was used by parents in this survey with a stronger reliance on informal care. Those households which used more formal care tended to be either low income or high income households.

“ The reported higher use of crèche type childcare by parents with either higher or lower incomes suggests that access to ‘formal’ childcare depends on either, parent’s ability to pay (hence the greater use by high income parents) or eligibility for subsidised childcare (hence the greater use by lower income parents). This suggests the existence of gaps in current provision of childcare, particularly among those whose income is not high enough to pay childcare but not low enough to be admitted via targeted funded childcare services.” (Riordan 2001)

Detailed surveys of Ireland’s childcare and early education system by the OECD highlight key failures : few supports for women with children, meagre parental leave, scarce affordable early childhood services, absence of fiscal supports for young children in childcare.

“With the exception of the infant school for children from four to six years, a critical volume of centre-based services has yet to be developed in Ireland. The situation can be even less promising for children born into situations of disadvantage, in which women with low educational levels tend to remain unemployed and live in poverty.” (OECD, 2004).

The importance of policies to support women's paid employment during childrearing years, such as childcare, family friendly and flexible workplace policies has been emphasised by the Consultative Group established by government to analyse and suggest ways to address the gender pay gap. (Consultative Group on Male/Female Wage Differentials 2002, Indecon, 2004)

A number of new policies had been introduced over recent years which were likely to benefit women as the primary carers, including extended leave entitlements and additional financial support to parents of young children. Economic and social policy had acknowledged women as the largest group amongst those marginalised from the labour market specifying lone parents and mothers of larger families in particular. However as the crisis hit the economy, additional financial supports for parents of young children have been withdrawn, child benefit has been reduced and funding for childcare in disadvantaged areas has been cut.

5. Summary and conclusions

With the exception of an extremely limited number of childcare places, parents in Ireland pay for childcare from their own take-home income on the private marketplace or rely on unpaid assistance from family or community. Little attention has been paid to the issue of affordability. There is no tax relief or tax credits for childcare in Ireland. Providers of childcare set their own rates which can vary considerably depending on the type and quality of service, location, age of child, and hours of attendance. Flexibility in terms of access and use of services can be very difficult to establish. Out-of-care services have not been developed in a way that emphasises educational and recreational activities and provides for the flexibility and affordability require by most parents. Many crèche and nursery facilities, for example, do not provide for part-time care, and will only accept children on a full-time basis or on the basis of paying a full-time fee.

Probably the most important new policy development over the past decade in relation to childcare has been the increase in maternity leave entitlement to 26 paid weeks (as well as 16 additional unpaid weeks). Increases in the level of child benefit (a universal payment) and the temporary introduction of an early childhood payment had improved financial supports to parents until these policies were reversed over the last two years of recession. To a large extent the thinking behind such policy initiatives is that women are to continue to be the primary carers. The continued lack of paternity leave and the unpaid nature of parental leave are likely to reinforce existing gender care divisions rather than encourage greater gender equality in the carrying of childcare responsibilities.

Current policy development reflects a contradiction evident in labour market policy towards women in Ireland. On the one hand there is the objective, supported by recent policy changes, of increasing the employment rate of women, including that of lone parents. On the other, there is a continuing assumption of the provision of care by, primarily women, unpaid in households or through the private market place, an assumption reflected in a low level of public provision. These contradictory aspects of policy are particularly evident in relation to lone parents towards whom there is pressure to reduce their dependence on welfare through accessing employment primarily and, to an extent training and education. But there is little evidence of a

parallel commitment to a system of care which is essential for lone parents to take up such opportunities.

Ireland's lack of a developed system of provision of childcare has been identified at both national and at EU level as a major barrier towards further increases in women's employment. Despite this, women had increased their role and position within paid employment in Ireland, constituting the main component of employment growth and meeting the Lisbon Targets, up until 2008 when recession and crisis overwhelmed the Irish economy. Realising the further potential of drawing more women from non-employment or 'inactivity' into paid employment requires a targeted employment strategy addressing the barriers to women's employment access, particularly the lack of adequate child and elder care services and the perpetuation of financial disincentives within a household based welfare and taxation system.

Unfortunately the period of high growth up until 2008 was not used as an opportunity to strongly invest in developing publicly supported childcare facilities on a comprehensive scale. The male dominated political system (in which only 14% of public representatives are women) lacked the political will to make childcare services a high priority. As the period of high growth came to an end and with pressures to cut back public expenditure by a very significant amount, it is unlikely that sufficient measures will be taken in the short to medium term future that will counteract the historically low level of childcare investment in Ireland.

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